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Keeping Tabs

The problem of making Congress privy to the operations of the Central Intelligence Agency without impairing its effectiveness is not a simple one. The CIA has traded on this circumstance in the past, using it to head off any serious move for congressional surveillance of CIA operations and spending.

Some reasonable compromise ought to be arrived at, however. In recent years it has become increasingly evident that the super-secret agency — so secret that Congress had only the roughest idea of its expenditures and virtually no information about what it did until after the fact — engages in clandestine activity about which the most serious questions can

be raised. There have been indications that the CIA may manipulate internal affairs of other countries and even engage in military operations — all without the knowledge, let alone the consent, of Congress.

As noted above, the difficulties posed by the nature and function of the CIA are not the sort that can be easily dealt with. The intelligence agency cannot be an open book; that would render it ineffective. It would be unrealistic to make public reports on what the CIA is currently involved in.

The bill introduced by Sen. John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky would not demand this, however. It would require that Congress, through its appropriate committees, be kept informed by being supplied with current CIA activity reports. Cooper's rationale in offering the legislation is sound: he argues that at present Congress must make important national security judgments without having access to anything like all the pertinent data.

Cooper's is not the only bill to address itself to this subject. In a concerted effort to bring the matter to head, Sens. Clifford P. Case of New Jersey and George McGovern of South Dakota also introduced measures. Three offered by Case are designed, he told his colleagues, "to place some outside control on what has been the free-wheeling operation of the executive branch in carrying on foreign policy and even waging foreign wars." McGovern's bill would let Congress in on how much is spent by the CIA, and would bar the present practice of concealing an undetermined amount of CIA funds in appropriations for other agencies.

Congress ought clearly to proceed with care in evaluating these measures. It must steer a course between the advantages of having more knowledge on which to base foreign policy decisions and the drawbacks of exposing sensitive intelligence operations to scrutiny. This will be difficult, but it is not impetus of legislative proposals. Somehow the dangerous practice of treating the CIA as is it were wholly exempt from review must be halted.